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ABSTRACT

There seem to be at least five separate concepts of generation currently in use: (1) developmental stage; (2) ranked descent; (3) age homogeneous group; (4) time span; and (5) "spirit of the age." The last concept differs from the first four because it refers to content rather than structure. Most current writings use this last definition. Most of the issues of generation center around the three respective social systems of the individual, the family, and the society. For the individual, his generation is part of his identity. The greatest differentiation of generations is probably seen within the family. Each rank of descent and each developmental stage is likely to be recognized. In society, there may be only two significant generations: those who are not full members of society and those who are. The study of generation gap can be clarified by considering two dimensions. The first is the amount of transmission of culture. The second is the amount of effort needed to negotiate the gap or the amount of conflict involved in the transition. By combining these two dimensions, we get four types of generation gap situations, ranging from the most serene to the most explosive. It is more important to know which of these four is most probable than to ask whether there is or is not a gap. (SJ)

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CONCEPTS OF GENERATION: DEFINITIONS AND ISSUES

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What do we mean when we talk about "generation?" Are we thinking about the individual's progress from one stage to the next? Or about interpersonal relationships between family members? Or about cultural transmission? When we use the term "generation gap," do we mean a transitional crisis of development? Or are we referring to conflict between parents and children? Or are we perhaps thinking about social change?

In my own efforts to study transmission of personality within the family, I have found myself stumbling over strange semantic confusions and logical dilemmas whenever I tried to think or read about the concept of "generation." In the following discussion I will lay out some of the definitions and issues I think I have untangled from this mess.

In the first place, there seem to be at least five separate concepts of generation in circulation. I'm going to define them in a moment. In the second place, there seems to be confusion about whether the locus of discussion is the individual, the family, or the larger society. I'm going to try to point out some of the implications of these loci. And in the third place, most writing on "generation" revolves around two chief dimensions of analysis: amount of change on the one hand, and degree of conflict or effort involved on the other hand.

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Definitions

Now for the first point--the five different concepts or definitions of "generation." For your convenience, they are itemized in Figure 1 of the handout sheet. The first of these, which deals with the individual, is developmental stage. Here generation is seen as a biological-social-psychological phenomenon. This meaning underlies arguments about the younger generation's difficulties in becoming adults, whether because of lack of opportunity for meaningful participation in a decadent social order or because of poor modeling behavior on the part of their elders.

Generation as developmental stage is partially tied to chronological age, though not everybody of the same age is at the same stage of development. This is increasingly true with age. The age range for the middle-age generation is much broader than that for the adolescent generation. Or at least it used to be.

The second definition of "generation" is ranked descent. This refers to the family scene. While generation rank may be traced from a significant dead ancestor, this kind of lineage orientation is not common in our society. Most family research uses a measure of ranked descent that either counts down from the oldest living family member or up or down from an index person.

Generation as ranked descent is independent of chronological age. A second-generation family member may be 5 days old or 75 years old. A group of 20-year olds may include people who are first ranked-descent generation or fourth ranked-descent generation. Generation rank is also a contingent designation. A person's rank depends on the survival of other people: his parents and grandparents. It is therefore relatively unstable. One could be second generation on Monday and first generation on Tuesday. Generation rank can

provide identity and role within the family, but his identity or role may have little generalizability to nonfamily relationships. How many of our friends' generational ranked-descent status do we know?

Because it is a contingent designation and because it has its locus in the family, the generation as ranked descent concept has interpersonal implications and interpersonal applications. In studies where the topic is parent-child relationships, the generational meaning that is usually intended is that of ranked descent.

The third meaning of generation is that of age-homogeneous group or age cohort. Where the developmental-stage meaning derives from the study of the individual, and the ranked-descent meaning from the study of the family, this third meaning, age group, derives from the social system. It cuts across family lines and verges on subculture status. This is the term we mean when we talk about "youth groups" or "the aged."

There are two kinds of age group generations: lifelong ones and temporary ones. In lifelong groups, people belong throughout their life. They get older, but their age-group generation stays the same. This kind of age-group generation generally has a historical derivation and character. For example, we speak of the generation of those born at the turn of the century, or of the Depression generation. Mannheim (1952) emphasizes the "noncontemporaneity of the contemporaneous." That is, all people living at the same time do not share the same history. Critical events have hit them at different points in their life cycle and thus affected them in different ways. Americans born at the turn of the century were adolescents or young adults at the time of the first World War, for instance. It was a different historical event for them than for their contemporaries who were born even ten years earlier or later.

The temporary kind of age-group generation lasts only for a limited part of the life span. While the lifelong age group may be said to be pinned to historical events, the temporary age group is located about critical transition points in the life cycle. It has been most frequent in youth, during the transition into adulthood and full membership in society. Once adult status is reached, this kind of age-group generation disintegrates and its former members merge with all the other adults. If old age or post retirement becomes a bona fide leisure subculture, distinct from a preceding middle-adult work subculture, the transition to old age could change from a mere sloughing off of workaday characteristics, known locally as disengagement, to an acquisition of a new set of leisure-time characteristics. This transition could then become the same kind of critical point as the present youth-into-adulthood passage. Given such hypothetical circumstances, it might be that temporary age groups would be formed to ease this new transition. And we would see bands of pre-aged adults protesting the irrelevance of the leisure establishment.

Eisenstadt's From Generation to Generation (1956) is an extensive study of age groups, particularly youth groups. He reviews their role in different kinds of societies to understand the conditions that lead people of the same age to unite.

Present-day youth groups seem to cut across not only family lines but, according to popular writers at least, almost all other boundaries as well--sex, social class, and nation. To the extent that such groups become autonomous and isolated from the rest of society, they might be regarded as social breakdown phenomena. A functioning social system should presumably incorporate everybody--or almost everybody. There will perhaps always be a few

outlaws who just couldn't fit into any society. But when there are large numbers of people who no longer can fit into the regular system, that system can no longer be considered effective. Maybe youth groups become powerful when the more age-diversified or complex systems decay. In fact, maybe it is that they presage a total disorganization of our culture which causes so much "generation-gap" anxiety today.

Most discussions about generations as age groups tend to bifurcate the population at the point of entry into adulthood, with a single older generation being pitted against a single younger generation. There is Youth vs. Establishment, or "under and over 30."

Now for the fourth definition of generation--that of <u>time span</u>. In this sense, a generation used to be considered 30 years. The generation theories of the German and French sociologists at the beginning of this century were based on what looked like historical evidence for a 30-year unit to social change--that significant events and changes occurred every 30 years. Because this corresponds roughly to the number of years between parents and children and between consecutive age groups, it came to be used as an almost mystically ordained time interval or unit. Today, 20 years seems a more meaningful generational distance than 30 years. And some say that generations are no longer appropriate units for social change; that age cohorts or time spans of 3 or 4 years is more to the point. In this way, siblings could belong to two generations, and the difference between parent and child--even if only 20 years in time--may be 5 generations.

This shortening may be related to such biological and social factors as age of sexual maturity and age of marriage, or social maturity. There are secular trends for both earlier age of sexual maturity and earlier age of

marriage. Fertility is also, of course, a factor. For example, the use of ranked-descent generations can become meaningless if the number of years between oldest and youngest child in a family is 30 years, particularly if there are many children spread in between.

The fifth generation concept is the German historical-cultural one of Zeitgeist or "spirit of the age." This differs from the previous four meanings of generation because it refers to content rather than structure. It refers to the style characteristics that distinguish one age from the next. For example, in many of the fine arts, a classical, formal Zeitgeist is followed by a romantic, loose style. Those current writings on "generation gap" that consist of fascinated descriptions of the dress, morals, and manners of "hippies" are within this tradition.

Issues

I will only have time to list a few of the issues involved in the discussions on generations. For a somewhat more detailed exposition I refer you to a paper now in press (Troll, 1970).

Three of the issues of generation center around the three respective social systems of the individual, the family, and the society. For the individual, his generation is part of his identity. This could mean either his developmental stage or his age group, our first and third definitions of generation.

Each individual has generational identities both in his family and in the larger society. These identities may be congruent, independent, or out of phase with each other. For example, a youth of 20 today who is third generation in ranked descent in his family, a visible "hippie," and an adolescent in maturation, could be considered synchronous or congruent in generational statuses. If he had been first generation in his family, he might have been

expected to have achieved more of an adult status and his "hippie" group membership and culture might be more inappropriate. If he had been third generation, an adolescent in social maturation, and untouched by the Zeitgeist he would have been equally incongruous.

The greatest differentiation of generations is probably seen within the family. Each rank of descent and each developmental stage is likely to be recognized. Parents will not fuse with grandparents after a certain age. Young-adult status is different from middle-age status, and middle-age status is different from old-age status. Each stage of childhood has its due. It makes a difference whether one is first ranked-descent generation and therefore the next to die, or third ranked-descent generation and well buffered in that respect.

In the larger social system, there may be only two significant generations: those who are not full members of society (children and, often, old people), and those who are.

Dimensions of Analysis

As I said in the beginning, the study of "generation gap" can be clarified by considering two dimensions. The first is the amount of transmission of culture, or its converse, the size of the gap. The second is the amount of effort needed to negotiate the gap or, alternately, the amount of conflict involved in the transition. By combining these two dimensions, we get four types of "generation-gap" situations. These are shown in Figures 2 and 3 of the handout sheet. Figure 2 applies to the generation-as-age group definition and therefore the societal aspect of the generation-gap situation. Figure 3, which is really just a variant of Figure 2, applies to the generation-as-developmental stage definition, and therefore the individual aspect of the generation-gap situation.

The most serene type is A in Figure 2 or A' in Figure 3. The gap is minimal, the transmission is high, and the amount of conflict, hostility, or effort is low. From society's point of view (A in Figure 2) there would be a "passing of the torch." We would expect to see this type where cultural uniformity is high. The corresponding individual situation (A' in Figure 3) is one of easy, smooth development. Even the term "stages" would be inappropriate here because there are no clear demarcations from one point in development to the next. We should expect to see Type A' where cultural discontinuity is low.

Type B or B' deals with situations where the gap is great but the transition remains smooth. This could be applied to the world view of our present-day alienated youth. The gap between where they are or want to be and where they would have to be as full members of society is wider than they care to jump. Adulthood as it exists has no value for them. Hopefully, a new and different system will evolve, and without violence. In Situation B', there is a clear end of one developmental stage and entry into another, perhaps marked by a ceremonial but peaceful rite of passage.

Type C or C', high transmission is combined with high conflict or affect or effort. From the societal point of view, there is a "palace revolt." In the family, a vigorous attempt is made by the son to oust the father from leadership. For the individual, the effort required to go from one developmental stage to the next is disproportionately large and may lead to "individual agony" or personality disorder.

Type D or D' is the most explosive. High gap and high conflict lead to social revolution or individual metamorphosis. In either case, there is marked qualitative change. This is the goal of the young activists of today and the fear of the Establishment.

There are clearly three kinds of "generation gap." B, C, and D. It may be more revealing of the state of a society or individual or family to know which kind is most frequent or probable than to ask whether there is or is not a gap. Certainly the fears that any evidence for difference between generations points inevitably to the existence of Type D are exaggerated. Our accumulating data on similarities in values between college students and their parents (Bengtson, 1970; Troll, Neugarten, and Kraines, 1969) contraindicates such a conclusion.

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Fig. 1. Generation concepts illustrated

Developmental stage	Ranked descent	Age group	Time span	Zeitgeist (in America)
Old age	1. Man (Woman)	65+ (Aging)	30 years	Horatio Alger
Middle age	2. Son (Daughter)	40-65 (Adults)	or	Gray flannel suit
Maturity	3. Grandson	25-40	25 years	Affluence
Adolescence	4. Great grandson	14-25 (Youth)	or	Activism and hippies
Childhood	5. Great, great grandson	---	4 years	---

Fig. 2. Dimension of generation gap from ranked descent, age group, and Zeitgeist definitions

Affect or Conflict	Transmission: High	Transmission: Low
Low	A: Passing of torch	B: End of era
High	C: Palace revolt	D: Revolution

Fig. 3. Dimensions of generation gap from developmental stage definitions

Effort needed	Size of gap: Small	Size of gap: Large
Easy--no conflict	A': Smooth, continuous development--no stages	B': True stages
Hard--conflict	C': Individual agony	D': Metamorphosis